

The Church on Main Street

The History of the Constitutional Presbyterian Church

Justin Watkins

The History of the Presbyterian Church in America is riddled with schisms and has produced an alphabet soup of Presbyterian sects in the United States. The beginning of the divisions amongst American Presbyterians began in the 1830s, when the country was battling an economic depression. The first split in a major American Christian denomination occurred as a result of the union between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. In 1801, these two agreed to put together a united missionary front in the rapidly opening western United States. The result was a mix of the Presbyterian and Congregational church models. Some of the Presbyterians did not like the idea of the Presbygation of their churches and questions arose over the issue of the combined missionary effort. As Thomas Cannon reported, “the main issue seems to have been the control of benevolence giving and the administration of semi-independent mission organizations such as the American Home Mission Society. The Old School was in favor of rigid denominational control. The New School was in favor of continuing the interdenominational cooperation which had existed, particularly among the Presbyterians and Congregationalists since 1801.”¹

The Old School-New School split occurred in 1837, but at the local level splits were later in coming. The Synod of Missouri attempted to keep Missouri Presbyterians from splitting along the quickly nationalizing divide of Old School v. New School. On 26 April 1840, the First Presbyterian Church of St. Charles, Missouri, split 29-14 over the issue. The majority voted Old School, but Rev. James Gallaher, pastor of the congregation, voted New School.² On 3 November 1842, the New School members founded a new church in an old building on Main Street. The Constitution Presbyterian Church met on property inherited by the church’s trustee Ludwell C. Powell through his marriage to Mrs. Ann B. Shaw, widow of Samuel Shaw. To the north of the church was some rental property in which George C. and Mary Easton Sibley had lived for a year prior to their move to the campus of Lindenwood University. South of the church was land belonging to Alton R. Easton, the namesake of Alton, Illinois, and brother-in-law to George Sibley. In 1845, the church constructed a new building on Main Street in which to meet. Powell, Henry Bangs, and Robert H. Parks “were elected as trustees to purchase a lot of ground and superintend the erection of the new church building. \$600 was borrowed for the purpose.”³ The church met at this location for twenty years, but the congregation disbanded shortly after the Civil War. By then, Powell and Bangs were deceased, but Robert H. Parks continued to serve as one of three church trustees until 1865. A December 1865 deed related to this property states concerning Parks, “the office of the said Robert H. Parks as such Trustee was declared vacant by certain provisions of the new Constitution of the State of Missouri.” In this deed, the church sold off a parcel fronting fifty-four feet on Main Street, but retained a certain portion of property.⁴ This

¹ Thomas L. Cannon, *Pioneer Days in the St. Charles Presbyterian Church*, 13.

² *Ibid.*

³ “The Old Constitution Presbyterian Church,” *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor*, 7 September 1918.

⁴ St. Charles County Deed Book U-2, 290-291, 15 December 1865.

was sold four days later and the operation of the Constitutional Presbyterian Church ceased in 1865.⁵ The Old School-New School Controversy ended in 1869.

By 1867, all of the former church's land was part of the newly founded Central Roller Mills, operated by S. H. Merten and Company.⁶ Merten and Company added to the church building and fitted it for the new operation as part of the flour mill. The building was gutted by a November 1898 fire, but the frame remained.⁷ The shell of the former mill sat dormant for eight years. J. H. Merten Commission Company, the successor of S. H. Merten and Company sold the property to H. B. Denker in 1899 and the site is labeled "Denker Central Building" in the 1905 St. Charles County Atlas.⁸ However, Denker sold the former church property to a competitor of the Central Mill, J. B. Thro Milling Company, in 1900.⁹ The church and warehouse were torn down, except the party wall with 230 N. Main St., and a new two-story building was completed in 1906 by its new owner William H. Rechtern. (However, there are some patterns in the outside brick on the north side of the building that are curious.) Rechtern purchased the property from J. B. Thro Milling Company, with the stipulation never to operate a grain mill on the site, in 1905.¹⁰ It became the new home of the Bruns Machine Company, which operated at 222-224 North Main Street from December 1906 to 1974. This was the second building built specifically for the needs of Bruns Machine Company, the first being 126-130 North Main Street (which was built in 1896).¹¹ New signs were made for the Central Building (as it was now designated) by Henry Broeker, Jr.¹² These are in the possession of the current owners of the building. From 1974 to 1980, Roy Benne operated Benne Hardware Company here.¹³ In 1983, George and Sharlotte Worthington purchased the building from the Rechtern family (who had owned it since 1905) and moved their Worthington Hardware store to 222 North Main Street.¹⁴ Worthington Hardware later became Worthington Stove and Hearth and continued in operation until 2007.

⁵ Ibid, Book 1, 271, 29 June 1867

⁶ Deed Book U-2, 503-504, 23 March 1866; Deed Book 1, 271, 29 June 1867.

⁷ "Gierige flammen," *St. Charles Demokrat*, 10 November 1898; *St. Charles Cosmos*, 16 November 1898

⁸ Deed Book 75, 88, 22 February 1899; 1905 St. Charles County Atlas

⁹ Deed Book 89, 164, 19 June 1900

¹⁰ Deed Book 91, 57, 10 November 1905

¹¹ *St. Charles, MO: To Manufacturing and Mercantile Interests* (1908), 38-39; the construction year is on the front of 126-130 North Main Street

¹² "Signs on the Central Building," *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor*, 28 November 1906

¹³ St. Charles city directories, 1974-1980

¹⁴ Deed Book 976, 418, 20 December 1983; see also Justin Watkins, "A Phoenix on North Main," *Historic Main Street St. Charles, Missouri, Magazine* I (3): 11, 16-18